

Master Hunter Program Celebrates 20 Years

The vision statement is simple, yet complicated at the same time: “Develop a Corps of sportsmen dedicated to preserving the heritage of hunting by giving back to the sport, displaying the highest standards of conduct and working to conserve wildlife habitat and hunting opportunity.”

The motto is also complex, but contains only two words: “Giving back.”

The initiative known as the Advanced Hunter Education program (AHE) and later the Master Hunter Permit Program (MHPP) has two decades of history. On this 20th year anniversary it is appropriate to look back to the beginning.

The Washington State Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW) Perspective:

The need for a group of highly-qualified hunters became apparent in the early 1990s. The then Washington Department of Wildlife (WDW) was faced with a dilemma: declining big game herds, and decreasing hunting access to private lands.

A few years of big-game animal losses due to harsh winters, loss of critical winter range, and reluctance by landowners to allow hunters on private land, required WDW to pay significant amounts in crop damage claims. These challenges caused WDW to seek innovative solutions.

Would landowners consider allowing a select group of hunters to have permission to hunt their land and thus help control the big-game damage and populations? A positive answer provided the avenue needed for the establishment of the AHE program in 1992, which was initially promoted as “A cooperative Public Education Program.”

Birth of a Program:

The AHE program (the original umbrella name) was actually conceived by WDW Hunter Education staff in the early 1980s before it became operational. Staff observations and data trends indicated that the issues facing hunting and hunters could not be addressed via outreach and training efforts limited only to new hunters.

There was a need for a robust, targeted effort designed for experienced hunters. The original WDW Hunter Education concept languished on the drawing boards for several years without much traction. It resurfaced and generated interest just before the agency introduced the Private Lands Wildlife Management Area (PLWMA) concept, during the period of merger between WDW and the Washington Department of Fisheries, which created WDFW.

WDFW worked with a small committee of landowners, Enforcement Program staff, agency biologists and individual hunters to flesh out areas of concern for the hunting community, landowner issues, educational objectives and performance standards. Other states were surveyed to determine if any related efforts were already underway. It was determined that no substantive programs existed anywhere in the United States.

Fish and Wildlife commissioners at the time were intrigued by the notion of serious voluntary outreach and education partnership opportunities based on positive incentives for participants, but they wanted to incorporate options that might also be appealing to non-hunters and casual hunters.

Thus, the original AHE program model incorporated the three sub-categories of (1) Sharp Shooter, (2) Conservationist, and, (3) Master Hunter. Since every hunter utilized a hunting implement of one sort or another, establishing a shooting proficiency standard was a logical first step. Similarly, the notion of direct, personal commitment to conservation/habitat/landowners offered potentially broad appeal to anyone who espoused interest in the outdoors. And finally, the study material and testing, admittedly detailed and demanding, would help inform serious students that the future of hunting likely rested in their hands and those of their fellow hunters.

The initial PLWMA cooperator was very apprehensive about allowing ‘general’ hunting on his property. The AHE program model allowed the agency to meet his concerns while also providing limited hunting opportunity for AHE graduates.

There was neither funding nor additional staffing for any of these ambitious plans and public interest waxed and waned according to the program incentives that were on the table during any given year. As desirable AHE incentives, such as special hunts for AHE participants, were introduced, public interest would sharply increase.

Those very coveted incentives, however, attracted a few participants with less than desired motives. As program participant numbers grew, the ability of limited staff to meet public interest and expectations clearly identified further internal flaws that needed to be addressed.

Initial Success:

The AHE program succeeded in creating a pool of highly qualified hunters to assist WDFW in managing wildlife in problem situation, likely saving millions of dollars that would have been necessary for the payment of crop damage claims. WDFW felt that AHE members performed well in addressing game damage, and improving landowner/sportsman relations in key areas of the State. In fact, meeting management objectives for the Colokum elk herd while addressing severe crop damage in the Kittitas Valley, could not have been achieved without the AHE program.

Making Necessary Improvements to the Program:

Worthwhile programs are not stagnant, but fluid and ever changing. AHE was no exception, presenting many challenges and opportunities for improvement.

The AHE program came under scrutiny when a handful of members exercised some serious breaches of fish and game laws and had lapses in ethical judgment and behavior. AHE was judged by WDFW to be too important to eliminate, but changes were definitely needed. In 2007 WDFW suspended the application process for the AHE program. The Fish and Wildlife Commission developed a special policy, C-6005- Master Hunter Permit Program, which outlined their expectations for improvement and focus.

WDFW and members of an existing Advanced Hunter Education Focus Group worked closely together to assess the existing program and make recommendations for improvements.

The new MHPP was formally launched and re-opened to applicants in early 2008 when the Fish and Wildlife commission passed WAC 232-12-073- Master Hunter Permit Program.

In 2009, the Washington State Legislature provided further authority for the new MHPP under RCW 77.32.570- Master Hunter Permit Program Fee, and RCW 77.15.760- Suspension of Master Hunter Permit-appeal process.

Significant changes to the AHE program were made to ensure hunters who apply understand the standards, qualifications, and expectations required to attain the status Master Hunter. Those changes included: 20 hours of conservation volunteer service, agreeing to abide by a Master Hunter Code of Conduct, completion of a Crime Observation and Reporting Training session, passing of a strict criminal background check, an application fee, and passing a much more detailed and focused comprehensive written examination. All former members of the AHE program also had to pass a criminal background check and agree to abide by a Master Hunter Code of Conduct in order to participate in the new MHPP. A zero tolerance policy was adopted for game and fish violations for both applicants and existing members. A Master Hunter Advisory Group was established by WDFW to help guide the direction of the MHPP.

The Program Continues:

The goals of the new MHPP include: 1) Promote safe, ethical, responsible, and legal hunting; 2) Promote support in the general public for hunting; 3) Promote the highest standards of hunting; 4) Improve landowner-sportsman relations; 5) Engage applicants and participants in volunteer conservation projects that benefit wildlife, wildlife habitat, promote hunting access on private land, and the associated priorities of WDFW; and 6) Develop a Corps of Master Hunters that can be engaged in addressing highly sensitive wildlife depredation issues.

Since the inception of the concept in 1992, approximately 13,000 hunters have applied and over 3,000 of them have successfully completed all requirements. After the transition process from the former AHE program to the MHPP in 2008, total membership was about 1,440. Currently total membership in the MHPP is about 1,950. It is estimated that at least 3,000 hours of conservation volunteer work is conducted by MHPP applicants and members each year. Further information about the MHPP can be found online at <http://wdfw.wa.gov/hunting/masterhunter/>.

The program offers an opportunity for conscientious, committed hunters who care about the future of hunting to assume a leadership role among their peers. Through their knowledge and conduct in the field, Master Hunters play a key role in improving relationships with landowners, and strengthen the heritage of Hunting.

Twenty years after the program was first initiated, Master Hunters continue to provide valuable services to the State and our natural resources by giving back.

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